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Thousands of Hema people are sheltering at a church

**Brutal ethnic fighting has flared recently in rebel-held areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Arnaud Zajtman of the BBC French service visited Bunia to find out what is happening.**

The Hema and Lendu people once lived in the same villages in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

But since June, the two groups have started to practice ethnic cleansing against each other and they now live in nearby but clearly distinct settlements.

Today, Lendus are the only ones left in the formerly mixed village of Kayalala, some 40km from Bunia town.

"Hemas and their soldiers were coming to the village, they were looting here and

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We don't have money to pay off soldiers, so we use machetes  
”Lendu chief  
Jean-Baptiste Padjoun  
Djallo**Search BBC News Online**[Advanced search options](#)[BBC ONE TV NEWS](#)[WORLD NEWS](#)[SUMMARY](#)**See also:**

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there. The soldiers even killed people in the village. Eventually we had to flee in the bush," recalls Jean-Baptiste Padjoun Djallo, one of the Lendu village chiefs.

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### Counter-attack

But after one month in the bush, Lendus counter-attacked and expelled the Hema minority.

"On 1 December, some Lendu warriors told us that the way was now clear for us to come back to our village. When we arrived, we saw 200 Hema dead bodies, chopped down by machetes.

"Our warriors went back into the bush. We don't have money to pay off soldiers, so we use machetes", the Lendu chief added.



Seventy Hema people were buried in a mass grave

As a result of the attacks, many civilians have fled their villages. They are staying in different urban centres in the province, accommodated with relatives or in church compounds.

The assesment made by an independent NGO established that almost 200,000 people have been displaced in the whole Ituri region since the inter-ethnic war started.

The death tolls range from 4,000 to 8,000 people, according to different sources.



### Refugees

Four thousand Hemas, mainly women and children, have been living within the compound of the church of Drodro for months.

Most of them have been fleeing Lendu attacks on their villages.

According to their account, Lendus have been singing anti-Hema songs and have attended regular political meetings for a few months before the actual beginning of the massacres.

However, it is difficult to have access to the Lendu side of the story as the Ugandan army does not allow journalists further north. Different sources indicate that the Ugandan army is launching a vast operation against Lendu bases there.



### **A war within a war**

Many Ugandan soldiers - including the commander in charge of Ituri at the beginning of the conflict - belong to sister tribes of the Hema people.

Villages were burnt in the conflict

Money, in addition to tribal affinity, has allowed some Hema farmers to get Ugandan support in their attempt to chase the Lendus from their land.

But Lendus have managed to get the support of some Mayi-Mayi warriors. They could then counter-attack the Hemas.

Mayi-Mayi warriors are fighting on the side of the forces loyal to DR Congo President Laurent Kabila.

Though these inter-ethnic clashes are taking place more

than 1,500 km away from the frontline in the Congo, links appear clearly between these ethnic clashes and the 18-month-old regional war in the Congo.

This context makes it difficult to see peace coming soon to Ituri.



Children have not been spared the fighting

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